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## EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF PUBLIC RECREATION FACILITIES

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It can be imagined that a normally healthy boy, if he understood at all the title of this paper, would be so frightened by it that he never would venture into the parks. As most men, and this number includes the best men, remain boys at heart, it may be well to offer at once a word of reassurance.

"Public recreation facilities" are indeed to mean, in this connection, the parks. Not that the parks are the only examples; but in this discussion I shall not even include playgrounds, where, in raffia, sewing and gymnastic lessons, there is considerable premeditated educational work, because the playgrounds are designed for a distinctly limited portion of the public, while parks are meant for everybody and the term is broad. Yet, at the very start, it may be admitted that to educate the public is not the prime purpose of parks; that information and instruction are entirely secondary by-products of their output. It is this admission which must comfort the frightened boy.

It is well to have regard for these by-products, if there be remembrance, all the time, that the particular thing which the recreation facilities of a park are intended to do is to re-create. Because to so many citizens, men and women alike, life is a grind, a round of labor and a season of care, it has been found that one especially efficient method of re-creating is simply to entertain. When one is entertained, labor ceases and care is forgotten, the old tired muscles relax, nerves are at rest. Thus public recreation facilities are provided because of the demand for a free and popular antidote to task-driving conditions. To furnish that antidote is their essential purpose. Education is incidental to it. Since, however, it is true, recurring to the manufacturing simile, that common stock dividends may come out of by-products, we shall act

wisely, when making considerable investments in public recreation facilities, to take into account by-product values.

It is important first of all to notice that all conscious action is educational. That means that education is an essential incident. As certainly as we operate our public recreation plant, we are sure to have the by-product. This education is either conscious or unconscious, and some of it may have so little value, or attain value only under such exceptional conditions, that it need not be considered. For example, the tennis and golf that are played in the park give pleasure and health, encourage muscular proficiency and mental alertness, but the knowledge they impart, in counting, measuring distances, judging wind force, etc., etc., is not of a kind that can be considered of much general value. So of the bathing on the public beaches. No doubt one gains knowledge of the sand life, and knows more than one otherwise might of tides and currents; but this knowledge too, save under exceptional conditions, can be left to the educational scrap heap. As to learning to swim and dive and float, knowledge of real value, that is part of the game, and, for all its value, may be classed with the lessons in other sports. With them, also, I put the folk dances.

To be sure, in all these social activities we learn more than we might otherwise of human nature, and that is precious knowledge. But it gains its value only because we are parts of human society, and therefore the special contribution it makes to our equipment for life is properly called social rather than educational. As to lessons in the sports, in a certain park system there are annual gymnastic meets, annual kite-flying contests, and an annual regatta in which miniature yachts sail for prizes, and there are pony races and polo contests and baseball games. Yet, because the sporting man falls so far short of the high popular ideal of an educated gentleman, I waive, in measuring the educational value of parks, all the information that the public incidentally derives from such occasions.

It is clear that the educational by-product of the park that is to be measured here is greatly restricted. It is to be only that which is most strictly educational and most worth cultivating and developing for the dividend it will pay. Such education gleaned from the parks is that which makes for broader public sympathies and wider interests, for finer appreciation of the good things of life; is

that education which opens the public's eyes and ears to the beauty that surrounds them, which makes us less of the animal and more of the man, richer through development of the resources within ourselves. The song of a bird, the scent of a flower, the glory of a sunset sky are parts of our common heritage. The sense impression that they make is dependent only on ability to perceive and faculty to enjoy; and this ability and this faculty are susceptible of education. If the park can cultivate these in large numbers of people, as an incident of its service as a public pleasure ground, it will bestow great benefit; it will vastly increase its usefulness to the community; it will not only heighten the enjoyment of its own attractions, but it will put into hearts and minds a faculty of enjoyment that will be of service in daily life. To such extent, the investment which has been made in the parks will be paying daily dividends on the common stock of human experience.

Not only are these things worth learning, but there is no other place where the power to appreciate and enjoy nature can be taught to the public as well as in the park. Certainly it could not be taught as easily or learned as pleasantly in school. To a considerable extent the instruction will be gained unconsciously. Here is a sunny hillside, where the park commission has had planted a great collection of lilacs. When the shrubs come into bloom, Rochester street cars carry on the front platform a sign stating that the lilacs are in flower, and on Sunday afternoons thousands upon thousands of people visit the hillside and roam among the blossoms, comparing varieties. A little later the rhododendrons, which are in a shaded ravine, become the park's special attraction—as the tulips were first of all, and the hothouse display before there was anything out-of-doors. And as the street cars move through the business streets, carrying for the occasion their incongruously sweet and lovely message, they have almost the effect of fairy princesses, for uncounted men and women, hurrying along the sidewalks, darting across the streets, glancing out of shop or office window, or riding to and from their work, are made, as by magic, richer and happier because of the vision that the sign brings to their minds. They have learned to know the flowers and to enjoy them.

Since many find pleasure in the mere act of learning, deliberate instruction can often be given without impairing a park's recreative value. This educational opportunity should be easily available,

though never thrust upon park visitors. Clear but unobtrusive labels upon trees and shrubs and in the beds of bloom are illustrative of one way of developing a park's educational value. This passive method may be supplemented by the training of employees to answer questions, not civilly only, but with sympathetic understanding, as the attendants of a public library are supposed to lure the inquirer into bypaths of knowledge. From this point of view, indeed, the park is crossed and recrossed by a thousand attractive bypaths that none may see until the scales of ignorance fall from the eyes. Yet the park is the people's, and until they have knowledge of these mysteries they cannot enjoy to the full their own.

As of the flora of the park, so of the fauna. There usually is a zoo in one of the city's pleasure grounds. The labels on the cages correspond to the labels on the trees and shrubs, and in each case something more should be given than merely the name. The natural habitat and some interesting fact should be added, that one may have a less slippery peg than only a name on which to hang his memory. But aside from the specimens in the zoo, there are the birds that build their nests in the park, and squirrels perhaps, and sheep and shepherd dog. I would have easily and pleasantly available to the public information about these matters. An inconspicuous little card, conveniently placed, might bear, for example, the statement that in this vicinity an oriole has its nest. One may know it by—and then would come briefly a description of its appearance and of its peculiar notes. It would be interesting to add the date when the oriole was first observed in the park, the additions to its family, the probable date of its return to a winter home and where that home may be. There can be no question that information such as this would add greatly to the popular interest in the park and hence to the enjoyment of it; and more than that, the park, in opening to the common sympathy and understanding of us all the world of vegetation and of animal life about us, would lead us out of ourselves into that wider interest which is one of the doors of happiness that the key of knowledge alone unlocks. The park, though we realize it not, should be the great outdoor school. It should teach the lesson of wood and stream and field to those whose horizon were otherwise bounded by paved streets.

In addition to the lessons that individual plants may teach us, there is something to be learned from their grouping and arrange-

ment. This is taught more subtly, perhaps should not be forced on a careless public in any consciously given lessons. But for all that it has real educational value. That it is absorbed unconsciously, as a portion of the schooling of the park, any one may see who makes note of the difference between the private gardens in a town that has, and a town that has not, well-developed parks.

Akin to this, is the artistic education to be gleaned from the park's sculpture and other decoration. In Chicago for the last two years there has been held, under the auspices in part of the Art Institute, an annual exhibition in a park of sculpture which is appropriate for park use. This does not consist of warriors on prancing steeds or of frock-coated statesmen, though as far as education is concerned even such works are valuable, but it consists of personifications of the spirit of the place, of appropriate fancies rendered visible—nature-poems expressed by sculpture—of the symbolical and imaginative. Many a lesson in art, literature and legend may be pleasantly learned from this work, even though history and biography be left to the city streets and squares. In fact, to educate, in literal translation, is not so much to impart facts as it is to “draw out” one's more interesting and better self. The sculpture that suggests, so that with the start thus given fancy may wander freely, peopling the park glades with fairy sprites, is educating in the truest sense and adds vastly to the park's charm. As further source of suggestion, as well as for the information they contain, branch public libraries are often placed in the rest houses of parks. The delight of reading under a tree beneath the open sky thus becomes, quite apart from the matter in the book, one of the precious lessons of the park.

As the ornaments of the park and its life in plant and animal offer opportunity for popular education through the eye, not with lessening but with increase of park enjoyment, so the music of the park offers opportunity for developing and training the ear. In the band concerts, which being free, and in attractive out-of-doors setting are sure of large attendance, there should be not less insistence on good compositions than on good execution. Rag time must be omitted, and by degrees, as public taste responds to the cultural opportunity, the character of the music can be raised to constantly higher level. There is no reason why public music in America should be inferior to that which is given in the public

places of Europe. In Rochester, to refer again to a local example, we have a couple of hundred thousand people and the right sort of a musical director, who is employed, it should be noted, on salary by the park board. Through a brief series of years, he has been raising the public musical taste by means of the concerts in the parks. He led us gently, beginning with music that was simple enough, and so beguiling us, almost before we knew it, into love of Beethoven, Mozart and Wagner. A program of last summer, which attracted 20,000 people, one in ten of the population, which is sufficient proof of its democracy, was made up of such noble numbers as the Beethoven "Egmont" overture, as the first movement from "Eroica" and as Schubert's overture to "Rosamunde." It included fragments from "Don Giovanni," "Sonnambula" and "Lucia di Lammermoor." No one could watch twenty thousand people of all kinds listening in rapt attention to these masterpieces of tonal art, without realizing the educational value of such opportunities or without feeling a thrill for the new richness that had come into their lives. Programs now are varied, with further educational opportunities, by the inclusion of soloists, vocal and instrumental, and there are great choruses, of the singing societies from home and from afar, of the combined church choirs, and lately of the children.

Mention of the children brings us to another field in which the parks have, or may have, educational value. This has been better developed by the Germans than by us. In Germany the parks are the natural source of supply for botanical material for study in the schools; often the children have special gardens in the parks, and often troops of school children, accompanied by their teacher, take nature-walks, when the lessons of the plant and animal life of the park are taught. In our American parks, we sometimes plant commemorative trees, which we make the subject of historical discussion; or celebrate Arbor Day by having school children plant park trees, with incidental lessons in manner of planting, in choice of variety, in selection of site, and in the general problems of forestry.

The truth is, we do not begin to get out of our parks all the returns we should until we have ceased to think of them as only restful pictures or places of entertainment. Nor will the thought of educational value, if we are content to give to it its proper sec-

ondary place, frighten away the public. Even the circus, the "amusement parks" of street railway companies and the five-cent theatres have "instructiveness" among their advertised attractions. For as a people we are glad to learn; and the education to be incidentally drawn from the public park is not of the sort, as we have seen, to destroy the pleasure and rest that the park is designed to give. Change of occupation and provision of a new and wider interest many times furnish the most effective rest and the highest pleasure.

At the beginning of the discussion it was said that the park did not constitute the only form of provision for public recreation. The municipal theatre is common in Europe, and with us it is to be found in Denver and in some New England towns. The educational possibilities of the drama would manifestly offer in themselves subject for an essay. More frequently still, there are the recreation houses, such as those of the South Park system in Chicago; and there is a growing use of the school house after school hours for the recreative needs of its district. But all these recreation facilities gravitate so naturally toward educational use, a very significant circumstance by the way, that they usually are classed as distinctly educational rather than as merely recreative. For this reason, and because this volume has had to do with pleasure-grounds, it has seemed well to confine the inquiry here to parks, the least likely of all the provisions, as one might think, to have an educational function. But even the parks are only at their best, and only give the greatest pleasure, as they teach.